



United States Department of Agriculture  
Rural Development

Rural Business-Cooperative Service • Rural Housing Service • Rural Utilities Service  
Washington, DC 20250

RD AN No. 3944 (1940-G)  
February 24, 2004

TO: Rural Development State Directors

ATTN: All Rural Housing and Business Programs Staff  
Rural Development Managers  
Community Development Managers  
Business Program Managers  
National Office Officials

FROM: Arthur A. Garcia      *(Signed by Arthur A. Garcia)*  
Administrator  
Rural Housing Service

John Rosso      *(Signed by John Rosso)*  
Administrator  
Rural Business-Cooperative Service

SUBJECT: Safety In and Around Illegal Methamphetamine  
Laboratories and Associated Environmental Cleanup

**PURPOSE AND INTENDED OUTCOME:**

This Administrative Notice (AN) provides guidance to Rural Development staff on how to recognize and properly handle properties previously used for the illegal production of the drug methamphetamine (hereinafter called 'meth'). This guidance is intended to educate field staff on how to recognize when a building has been used as an illegal meth lab and be mindful of the dangers of hazardous materials associated with the illegal production of meth. This guidance is also intended to speed up the disposal of Real Estate Owned (REO) properties used as illegal meth labs by outlining standard remediation procedures for the clean up of contaminated meth labs.

**COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS AN:**

No previous AN has been issued on this subject.

EXPIRATION DATE:  
February 28, 2005

FILING INSTRUCTIONS:  
Preceding RD Instruction 1940-G

## **BACKGROUND:**

The number of homes and apartments that have been used as meth labs is on the rise. Meth laboratories have been seized in homes in residential areas, vehicles, apartments, hotels, kitchens, bathrooms, garages, and various other outbuildings. The most productive laboratories are commonly located in rural areas, such as farms, rural residences, and forestry land. In addition, rural areas are often targeted for laboratory manufacturing to avoid detection by law enforcement. Meth lab seizures have risen 573 percent nationally since 1996. The total number of seized meth labs rose from 2,319 in 1995 to 13,281 in 2002. Over 75 percent of the meth labs seized in 2002 were west of the Mississippi River.

## **IMPLEMENTATION RESPONSIBILITIES:**

Traditionally, laboratories are located in sparsely populated or isolated rural areas in order to avoid detection. A 573% increase in the number of illegal labs seized in this country and the fact that these labs will most likely be found in rural America, increases the likelihood that Rural Development field staff might encounter an illegal meth lab during the course of performing their job. Therefore, it is critical that Rural Development field staff be able to recognize the signs that a property has been used, or is still being used, for the illegal production of meth. The timely identification of a property as an illegal meth lab should reduce the chance that Rural Development staff will come in contact with potentially dangerous individuals involved with the illegal production of meth and the hazardous materials associated with the illegal production of meth. Knowledge that a property was once used as an illegal meth lab can also be critical information when calculating property value. It is important to remember that the cost to clean up a meth lab usually averages between \$2,000 and \$3,000 but can be as high as \$150,000.

The following list outlines some common indicators that a property may have been used as illegal meth lab:

- Access denied to landlords, neighbors, and other visitors.
- Renters who pay their landlords in cash. (Most drug dealers trade exclusively in cash.)
- Covering or blacking-out windows.
- Burn pits, stained soil, or dead vegetation.
- Waste in trash, pits or piles, such as high amounts of:
  - Packaging from over-the-counter cold pills.

- Empty containers from antifreeze, white gas, ether, starting fluids, Freon, lye or drain openers, paint thinner, acetone, or alcohol.
- Compressed gas cylinders, or camp stove (e.g., Coleman) fuel containers.
- Packaging from Epsom salts or rock salt.
- Anhydrous ammonia tanks, propane tanks or coolers containing anhydrous ammonia.
- Pyrex/glass/Corning containers or other kitchen glass ware with hoses or duct tape.
- Coolers, Thermos bottles, or other cold storage containers.
- Respiratory masks and filters, dust masks, rubber gloves, funnels, hosing and clamps.
- Coffee filters, pillowcases or bed sheets stained red (used to filter red phosphorous).
- Apartments or buildings that smell like chemicals, including sweet, bitter, ammonia, or solvent smells.

## **POTENTIAL HEALTH EFFECTS**

There are dozens of chemical products and substances that are used interchangeably to produce meth. Hazardous chemicals may also be formed during the manufacture of meth. In addition, a minimum of 5 to 7 pounds of chemical wastes are produced for each pound of meth manufactured.

The effects caused by exposure to meth lab chemicals depend on (1) the lab process used (2) the amount of chemical and length of exposure and (3) the age and health of the person exposed. The chemicals found in an illegal meth lab may enter the body by being breathed, eaten, or absorbed through the skin.

Acute exposure to the chemicals found in an illegal meth lab can cause shortness of breath, cough, chest pain, dizziness, lack of coordination, chemical irritation, or burns to skin, eyes, nose and mouth. Death could result when exposure is to a particularly toxic chemical or the person exposed is particularly vulnerable. The chance of acute exposure is greatest during or immediately after production. Acute exposure is most likely to occur in law enforcement personnel involved in raids on illegal meth labs. Personnel who enter illegal meth labs after production has been stopped, but before proper ventilation or cleaning can still be exposed to hazardous chemical wastes and experience unhealthy effects. Less severe exposure can cause headaches, nausea, dizziness, or fatigue. These less-severe symptoms usually go away after several hours of exposure to fresh air. There have been, however, reports of people

who have moved into former lab sites who have suffered chest and respiratory symptoms months after lab chemicals were removed.

### **ON-SCENE SAFETY**

Anyone who believes they have discovered an illegal meth lab or the site of an abandoned lab should immediately notify local law enforcement and should not enter the site. Remember safety first. Do not touch, inhale, or otherwise expose yourself to chemicals. Anyone who inadvertently enters a lab should immediately leave the area without disturbing the cooking process, chemicals, or equipment. Illegal meth lab sites are potentially dangerous and they are crime scenes. Law enforcement officers will decide when the property can be entered.

Rural Development staff should follow the following guidelines:

- Only enter contaminated areas after ventilation and gross cleanup.
- Limit time on-site minimizes exposure.
- If exposed, take action to contain or eliminate (e.g., wash exposed skin, remove contaminated clothing).
- Avoid transporting contamination on clothes or shoes.
- Seek medical care if needed.
- When a meth lab has been identified, the Rural Development Housing Program Director and State Environmental Coordinator should be notified.

### **SITE EVALUATION AND SAMPLING**

A site evaluation is needed to (1) assess immediate and potential for long-term danger from any contamination and (2) determine the need and method for decontamination. The areas of contamination are divided into the primary and secondary. The primary areas include production, inside disposal, and outside disposal. The secondary areas are areas where contamination has migrated.

The primary area of contamination directly related to the production of meth can result from spills, boil-overs, explosions, and by chemical fumes created during production. Contamination may be found on floors, walls, ceilings, glassware, containers, working surfaces, furniture, carpeting, draperies and other textile products, plumbing fixtures and drains, heating and air-conditioning vents. The primary area of contamination directly related to indoor disposal of wastes can include sinks, toilets, bathtubs, plumbing traps and floor drains, vents, vent fans and chimney flues. The primary area of contamination directly related to outdoor

disposal of wastes can be caused by dumping or burning on or near soil, surface water, groundwater, sewer or storm systems, septic systems, and cesspools.

The secondary areas of contamination may include locations where contamination has migrated (e.g., hallways, high traffic areas), common areas in multiple dwellings, and adjacent apartments or rooms, and common ventilation or plumbing systems in hotels and multiple dwellings.

If Rural Development does not own the property (i.e., it is not an REO property) a determination must be made as to the best course of action that should be taken. Consultation with local law enforcement officials is required and consultation with the National Office Program and Program Support Staff (PSS) is recommended. If Rural Development owns the site (i.e., it is an REO property), the Agency should contract for the services of a qualified hazardous material professional. This professional will determine what kind of chemical sampling will be necessary. The contractor will compare sample results to determine if any Federal, state, or local action levels have been exceeded and if further cleanup is necessary. Cleanup requirements will depend on the types of chemicals found, the manufacturing process used, and how long the lab was active, and will be based on applicable Federal, state, or locally established protocols.

### **CLEANUP OF ILLEGAL METHAMPHETAMINE LAB**

Indoor contamination found at illegal meth labs might require one or more of the following cleanup procedures:

- Removal,
- Ventilation,
- Neutralization,
- Washing,
- Encapsulation.

Outdoor contamination found at an illegal meth lab may require

- Removal,
- Drainage control,
- Removal or treatment of contaminated water or soil,
- Alternate water supplies when potable water source is contaminated, and
- Site controls such as fencing or signs.

Cleanup of a site may be as simple as venting and the removal of chemicals, apparatus, and wastes. However, demolition of a contaminated structure may be the best option if costs for clean-up are high. Costs for clean-up should be determined by the environmental professional responsible for the site evaluation and reflected in the appraisal of value. In any case, Rural Development will work with Federal, state and local health officials to verify that any illegal meth lab is properly cleaned, and contamination levels are below those considered hazardous.

### **DISPOSAL OF ILLEGAL METH LAB PROPERTIES**

Rural Development will not sell, or allow occupancy of a property that was formerly used as an illegal meth lab until cleanup has been completed and verified by a hazardous material professional.

### **POINTS OF CONTACT**

Please direct all questions pertaining to this AN to your State Environmental Coordinator or Program Director. If they are unavailable or unable to answer your question contact Brian LaFlamme or Linda Rodgers of the National Office's Program Support Branch. Brian LaFlamme can be reached at (202) 720-9656, and Linda Rodgers can be reached at (202) 720-9647. State Program Directors may also contact their respective Deputy Administrator in the National Office.